

---

An Account of the Movement in  
Massachusetts to close the Rural  
Schools, and to transport their  
Pupils, at Public Expense, to the  
Village Schools.

By WILLIAM L. EATON,

Superintendent of Schools, Concord, Mass.

---



# AN ACCOUNT

OF THE

MOVEMENT IN MASSACHUSETTS TO CLOSE  
THE RURAL SCHOOLS,

AND TO TRANSPORT THEIR PUPILS, AT PUBLIC  
EXPENSE, TO THE VILLAGE SCHOOLS.

BY

WILLIAM L. EATON,

SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS, CONCORD, MASS.

---

BOSTON :  
NATHAN SAWYER & SON, PRINTERS,  
70 STATE STREET.

1893.



Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2017 with funding from

This project is made possible by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services as administered by the Pennsylvania Department of Education through the Office of Commonwealth Libraries

## MOVEMENT IN MASSACHUSETTS TO CLOSE THE RURAL SCHOOLS.

SINCE the year 1869, the cities and towns of Massachusetts have been authorized by law to appropriate and expend money for the conveyance of pupils to and from the public schools. At first this authority was used, in accordance with its apparent purpose, mainly to convey pupils to the high school, as generally there was but one such school in a town. Within a few years, however, many communities have used this authority to increase the educational advantages of the children — constantly decreasing in numbers — who live in the districts at a distance from the centres of population. This was accomplished by closing many district schools, and transporting, at public expense, their pupils to the neighboring district school or to the village. When, in 1889, it became apparent that the towns were spending considerable sums of money in this way, the State Board of Education began to report the amounts expended. The following table is compiled from the State Reports : —

|  | 1888-89.    | 1889-90.    | 1890-91.    | 1891-92.    |
|--|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Aggregate amount expended for conveyance of pupils . . . . . | \$22,118.38 | \$24,145.12 | \$30,648.68 | \$38,726.07 |
| Annual increment . . . . .                                   | —           | 2,026.74    | 6,503.56    | 8,077.39    |
| Number of cities and towns thus expending money . . . . .    | 104         | 117         | 145         | 160         |

In order to secure fuller information regarding this important movement, a circular letter of inquiry was sent to 165 cities and towns. Replies have been received from 135, and the answers tabulated. The following summaries are of interest : —

I. The cities and towns that reported an expenditure for 1891-92 of \$33,500 will expend for current year, \$48,300.

II. Fifteen towns and cities report conveyance to high school only, at a cost of \$8,650.20 for 462 pupils.

III. It appears that in the remaining 120 towns and cities, there were, prior to the beginning of this movement to consolidate, 632 outlying schools. Of this number, 250 have been closed within the past twelve years, and to-day nearly 2,000 pupils are being conveyed to adjacent district schools or to the village schools.

IV. To the question, "Is it the policy of your town ultimately to close all the schools outside the centres of popula-

tion?" twenty-five answer "Yes," without qualification; forty answer "No;" and nearly all the others reply that their towns are working for that end, or are considering the question, or hope to accomplish such a result.

V. To the request for a brief statement of the reasons that determined the towns to close district schools, and transport the pupils to other schools, the replies indicate two distinct purposes — one financial and the other educational. In many of the towns of the State, the depopulation of the districts outside the villages has made it cheaper to transport to other schools the few pupils living in the districts than to teach them *in situ*. In other towns, the desire to make strong central schools, and the purpose to give all the children of the town the benefit of better teachers, better appliances, and better supervision, have been the dominant motives to determine consolidation.

VI. To the question whether the results have been satisfactory, there is a substantial agreement in the affirmative. The most emphatic expressions of satisfaction come from those towns in which the educational motives have been the dominant ones. Repeatedly comes the assertion from this latter class of towns, that the parents would not return to the old system of isolated schools if it were possible.

The following extract from a recent report of the school committee of Conway — a town in western Massachusetts, with a population of 1,500, and a school membership of 237 (1891-92) — is pertinent: "The same method of uniting and bringing the pupils of the smaller districts to the village has been pursued as formerly. . . . In some instances, the parents are quite strongly opposed to the movement; but, upon trial, many times the opposition disappears, and the parents have no desire to return to the old system. In districts where there are few scholars, it is practically impossible to maintain a school of interest and profit to the pupils, and economy to the town. Notwithstanding all the inconveniences and difficulties, we believe the only practical way to elevate schools to a higher standard is by consolidating and transferring the pupils of the rural districts to the centre."

The town of Concord is regarded generally and properly as the pioneer in this movement to close all her district schools, primarily from educational motives, and to convey their pupils to the graded central schools. The results in Concord were observed carefully by the educators in Massachusetts, and found to be good, and the example of Concord was made known throughout the State by the agents of the State Board of Education, and by the official reports of the Board year after year. Moreover, her near neighbors, Bedford, Lexington, Lincoln,

Wayland, Weston, Sudbury, Maynard, and Acton, have either already followed her example, or are, to all appearances, preparing to do so.

The following extracts from my account of the inception and growth of this system in Concord (printed in 1892) will reveal to the inquirer how were met the obstacles that stood in the way of the abandonment of the time-honored district school that gathered in the little red schoolhouse of the poet's fancy and of the "old schoolboy's" reveries.

Concord is a town of about four thousand inhabitants, situated twenty miles northwest of Boston. It was originally laid out, in 1636, six and one-tenth miles square; but, having lost territory from time to time, it now contains about twenty-five square miles. For school administrative purposes, it was divided early in the century into two village districts, and five rural districts.

"For many years prior to 1879, the common schools of Concord were twelve in number, occupying eleven houses. Five of these schools were placed in the central village; two under one roof were at West Concord; and the remaining five were country district schools for the accommodation of the out-lying farming population. The district schoolhouses were at distances from the Centre, varying from one and one-half to three miles. At the Centre was the high school, to which children came from all parts of the town. An attempt had been made, with partial success, to grade the Centre schools. The school boards of that day, therefore, had to deal with a system of schools, some ungraded ones, and the rest mixed schools imperfectly graded. These schools were taught by experienced teachers, most of whom—if not all—had received a special training for the work. The influence of Colonel Parker's great work at Quincy was reflected in many of the schools. Yet the general results were far from satisfactory; and the school committee, under the leadership of their energetic superintendent, Mr. John B. Tileston, appreciating the defects of the existing system, and, seeing clearly a remedy, met the emergency resolutely. A vigorous and wisely directed agitation procured from the town an appropriation of money sufficient to build and equip an eight-room schoolhouse at the Centre. In December, 1880, this house (named the 'Emerson School') was ready for occupancy, and received the children from the village schools. An immediate and inevitable improvement in every quality that distinguishes a good from a poor school resulted. The school committee then turned their attention to the district schools. These schools had been for a long time a cause of great anxiety. They were growing feebler, and they were expensive to maintain in proportion to the number of pupils they served. The Emerson School would accommodate all the



children, and the laws of the State (Chap. 132, Acts of 1869) enabled the town to raise and appropriate money 'to be expended by the school committee in their discretion in providing for the conveyance of pupils to and from the public schools.' The school committee adopted the suggestion, that it was advisable to close the district schools, and to convey the children to the Centre. To carry the suggestion into effect was a difficult matter. The difficulty can be realized readily when it is understood that a period of nearly ten years elapsed between the closing of the first and the closing of the last of the five district schools, and that, during these years, the successive school boards never lost sight of the end in view, nor relaxed their efforts to reach that end. Nor is it strange that obstacles were encountered. A strong and rational conservatism existed in the districts. The idea of consolidation was novel, and raised doubts and objections that could not be met by past experience here or elsewhere. On the other hand, it was possible for the plan to prevail in the end because the communities directly affected were highly intelligent, and formed their judgments thoughtfully and correctly. It is an interesting fact, also, that, during the whole ten years of change, a majority of the committee were farmers: and that, for the most of the time, a majority were the local representatives of the districts involved. From the successive annual reports of the school committee, the facts bearing upon the history of the movement can be gleaned. A few of the facts of record will be given here, in order to indicate the method of procedure on the part of the school committee.

"In 1879, the school in District 7 was closed, and the children conveyed to the Centre, because the committee 'did not feel justified in keeping the school open for the small number of pupils attending it.' About the same time, the grammar school pupils in District 2 were directed to attend the Centre school, and 'to make their own way thither.' In 1881, Superintendent Tileston reports that the children of District 7 'have been carried to the schools of the village for more than a year. The parents were at first mostly opposed to this course. They seem now entirely satisfied, and would not have their old school if they could.' In 1881, the parents in District 2 petitioned the committee to close their school and convey their children to the Centre. A counter-petition was sent in, however, before action had been taken. The committee, preferring to wait for a more permanent sentiment, did not close the school. In the same year, the school in District 5 was closed without opposition. An attempt to close, at the same time, the school in District 6 met with so strenuous opposition, that the committee did not persist in closing it. In their next report (1882), the com-



mittee refer to their action as follows: 'It has not been the policy here to bring the children of the outside districts to the central schools, unless the voters of the district desire it. When the number of pupils is less than ten, the committee feel that they are not warranted in incurring the expense of keeping a separate school.' They also urge that 'it is a question which the parents in the outer districts of the town should consider carefully, whether the instruction at the centre of the town is not better, as well as cheaper, than it can be made in their own schools, and what is their duty in such a case.' In 1885, the school in District 3 was closed at the request of the local member of the school committee. In 1887, the parents in District 2 petitioned the committee to convey their children to the Centre. The committee acted promptly, and began to convey the children. A counter-petition then was sent in, but an investigation was made, and the committee, consulting what they 'believed to be the best interests of the children,' denied the second petition. In the same year, the school in District 6 was closed by vote of the committee, and the scheme of consolidation was effected.

"The apprehensions of the owners of real estate, that a depreciation of values would result if the local schools were closed, have proven to be groundless. The natural reluctance of parents to send their young children so far from home, and for all day, to attend the Centre school, has vanished. The children are conveyed in comfortable vehicles fitted up for their accommodation. They are in charge of trusty drivers *en route*, and at noon they are under the especial care of one of the teachers, who has an extra compensation for the service. When it is practicable, a farmer living near the extreme end of the district is employed to convey the children. Often the farmer's wife drives the conveyance — an arrangement that meets the entire approval of the school committee, and is, perhaps, the most satisfactory one possible. As a rule, the committee do not approve of entrusting the duty to the hired man. Three two-horse barges, and two one-horse wagons are in use at present. All these vehicles are fitted with seats running lengthwise, and are closed or open at sides and ends as the weather requires, and in cold weather are provided with blankets and straw. The driver starts from or near the remote end of his district, and drives down the principal thoroughfare, taking up the children at their own doors or at cross-street corners.

"The attendance of the children conveyed is several per cent. better than that of the village children, and it is far higher than it was in the old district schools. This is not strange when one reflects that the children are taken at or near their own doors, and conveyed to school without exposure in stormy weather, and

with entire comfort in cold or snowy weather. Discipline in the carriages is maintained readily, as the driver has authority to put out any unruly child. The children are conveyed from one and one-half to three and one-half miles. The cost of transportation is about fifty dollars per week. It is estimated that it would cost seventy dollars a week to maintain schools in all the districts. The number of teachers in the Centre schools is not increased by the consolidation, as the eighty to one hundred children from the districts are distributed quite uniformly among the various rooms.

“Whatever advantages a system of carefully graded schools, occupying a well-ventilated and well-eared-for schoolhouse, taught by a body of intelligent and earnest teachers co-operating to secure the best discipline within and without the school-room, has over a mixed country school, such advantages are shared alike by all the inhabitants of this town. All alike are interested in all real progress in methods of discipline and instruction, and in improved appliances to aid instruction. Superintendence becomes more efficient. The introduction of new subjects of study and of drawing, music, gymnastics, manual training, is made easy, since all the pupils of the town are found in three schoolhouses. Appliances of all kinds and books of reference can be provided more extensively and at less cost. In short, every scheme to make the teaching more efficient, or broader, can be carried into effect far more readily. The history of this movement in Concord conclusively shows that the success of the plan here was due to its intrinsic merit, acting upon the minds of an enlightened people desirous of furthering the true educational interests of their children.

“Many incidental advantages subordinate to the prime one have resulted. All the children of the town meet on the same arena, test the quality each of the other, and exchange from the beginning those influences which will mould them to act together harmoniously and intelligently in the future. All the parents of the town have an equal interest in the welfare of the two central systems of schools, and for many years dissensions about the maintenance of schools have been unknown in our town meetings. Many families have come to live in the town because of its educational advantages. The farms that come upon the market find readier sale than ever before. The children from the farming districts are no longer distinguishable from the village children by a certain awkwardness of manner or address. The moral tone of the school and of the school-yards has been elevated wonderfully. The parents feel and appreciate these many incidental, but vastly important, advantages, and are convinced that the system is superior to the one it has displaced.”



